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CITY REPORT

Plan Commission OKs 71-story tower on Wabash

By Jeanette Almada

Special to the Tribune

Published May 29, 2005

The Chicago Plan Commission has approved a \$300 million, 71-story condominium building to go up in the Jewelers Row Historic District.

Chicago-based Mesa Development will build the tower, through Monroe/Wabash Development LLC, on a 40,000-square-foot site at 21-39 S. Wabash Ave., occupied by four buildings.

Mesa is under contract to buy three of the buildings from the Art Institute of Chicago, which will occupy 41,000 square feet of space in the new tower, according to Richard Hanson, a principal at Mesa.

The developer will enter into a right of easement agreement, in perpetuity, for ground-floor space in the existing Sharp Building, at 37-39 S. Wabash, where Mesa will build its lobby to the residential portion of the tower, Hanson said in an interview last week.

The tower will have up to 360 condos ranging from an about 900-square-foot one-bedrooms to much larger penthouses, according to Gary Klompmaker, an architect at Solomon Cordwell Buenz & Associates, which designed the building.

The residential portion of the tower, to occupy the building's 15th through 71st floors, will be accessed at 60 E. Monroe St. There will be more than 8,500 square feet of ground-floor retail space, which Hanson said he will not begin to market for several years because the project is in early planning stages.

He estimated that 35 to 50 percent of the units must be sold before Mesa can begin construction. The average price of units will be in the high \$300,000s, Hanson estimated. Sales will begin in February.

The tower is designed with four major setbacks, Department of Planning and Development staff told the Chicago Plan Commission this month. One is at the sixth floor, where the tower meets the cornices of the three late 19th Century building facades, which will be incorporated into the design, Klompmaker said. The other three, on the 15th, 42nd and 60th floors, will have landscaped green space to be used by residents.

The Art Institute will occupy space on the second and third floors. An 18,000-square-foot athletic facility with pool, five squash courts and workout rooms will be on the 13th and 14th floors, and will be connected to the University Club via a 13th-floor sky bridge, Planning Department officials told plan commissioners.

Mesa is negotiating with a syndicate of banks for financing, Hanson told commissioners.

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Though City Council approval of the tower is still needed, the Plan Commission's approval of the project as a planned development is a major step in a lengthy dispute between preservationists who opposed the building and city planners who championed the project.

Critics charge that the project sets a precedent that allows high-rises to go up in otherwise low-rise historic districts -- no more than 300 feet tall in the Wabash Avenue Jewelers Row Historic District. "I don't understand why we set up these historic districts, then ignore the guidelines that protect them," David Bahlman, executive director of the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois, told commissioners.

His organization, in its June board meeting, will consider filing a suit against the city for violation of historic district guidelines, Bahlman said in an interview last week. He conceded, though, that such action might be futile.

"We went to the Supreme Court to fight Soldier Field and that didn't stop that development, and yet this is a slippery slope that sets a terrible, terrible precedent. Everyone is so high on the fact that this is doing good things for the city, good things for the Art Institute, good things for Wabash Avenue and for contributing buildings that are in decay. But there has been no discussion about shadow studies, traffic studies, and they are ignoring the fact that there is a historic district there," Bahlman said.

" . . . For as long as the city has had a landmark district program, it has respected prevailing building heights. Now they are throwing that guideline out, and we think it will be much more difficult for the city to fend off other developers in the future [who want to build non-compliant projects] in historic districts," Bahlman said.

City officials told the Plan Commission that the new tower will enliven a dark and dank Wabash Avenue. Ald. Burton Natarus, a plan commissioner whose 42nd Ward includes the tower site, asserted that Wabash Avenue is a special circumstance, a dark commercial street diminished by unsightly elevated tracks.

He added that he championed demolition of those tracks decades ago, while preservationists fought to have the "L" protected with landmark status.

"Wabash Avenue may be called a Jewelers Row but that strip is dirty, it's tacky, it's seedy," Commissioner Nancy Pacher said as she approved the project. "It looks awful; it doesn't look like a Jewelers Row. It looks like a cheap fast-food strip, and I, for one, can't wait until this development takes place."

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